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ABSTRACT

A writing instructor's quest in a screenwriting course was to convince her students to get in touch with their inner voices. Her male students are mostly Tarantino clones who write scripts that could star Robert DeNiro or Harvey Keitel. The instructor wanted them to create characters that are believable and that the audience can attach to in a meaningful way. She worked all summer creating a course that would help them explore their inner selves as writers. She used rhythms, first bringing drums and tambourines and giving the students freewriting assignments while she beat a rhythm, and later played classical music at the beginning of each hour while they wrote. Three by five cards were used for journal keeping--the students kept them in their pockets and were told to write down whatever came to them. A visit to the Horticultural Gardens allowed exploration of the five senses. If they could connect, even briefly, to that inner child, they might be able to find that original voice they were born with, and leap to a new place. Most important, they worked in groups for the entire class. A writing group can be a writer's lifeline--a source of constant evolving inspiration, a place where there is trust. (NKA)

Creative Writing: The Warm-Up

By Maria Bruno

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CREATIVE WRITING: THE WARM-UP

Maria Bruno

Every year I teach a course in screenwriting at a major midwestern university. Most of my students are male Tarantino clones who write scripts that could star Robert DeNiro or Harvey Keitel. There's always a bank heist, an uzi, and second tier gangsters who grunt in Brooklynese. Everyone says the f-word an awful lot, and they smoke stogies, drink tequila, and play a mean five car stud. There's lots of gunfire, testicular explosions, and male banter about Nintendo, Aerosmith, and perverse bodily functions. The women characters appear as molls, whores, bimbos or heroin addicts. Every now and then there's a kindly large hippped woman who shows up dispensing wisdom and comfort food, much like Martin Scorsese's own mother who acted in his films portraying the mother of an array of dysfunctional gangsters. For the most part, my students' female characters are invisible, and if they speak, they speak in hushes or whispers then disappear at any sign of real action. The female characters are most often auxiliaries to the real meaningful action. And even though I caution my students that females are 51% of the population and deserve to be represented in films in positive ways and not just as props or scenery, (I even have a lecture entitled Thelma and Louise. Hello?) they still submit scripts that are male driven and derivative. Most have that classic Tarantino scene with six men wearing black suits who amble down the street in wide angle, smoking filterless Camels, talking about heists and hookers with hearts of gold. One is, ironically, always named Mr. Pink.

I wanted my students to become writers, to get in touch with their inner voices, to create characters that are believable and that the audience can attach to in a meaningful way. Whenever I give opening lectures on "Creativity" or "Getting in Touch With Your Inner Voice", I find my male students oddly resistant, as if this was

something that might betray their avowed masculinity. To them my request was somehow aligned with the occult, the province of witches and unsuccessful female screenwriters who pen annoying "Chick Flicks."

I feel a certain responsibility to all my potential screenwriting students since one of my former students actually did make it reasonably big in the movies, crafting a cult classic that included blood dripping from lightbulbs, a woman clad only in a thong bikini murdered in a bathroom, and several buckets of pea green vomit. In *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Guide to Higher Creativity*, Julia Cameron writes "When I teach screenwriting, I remind my students that their movie already exists in its entirety. Their job is to listen for it, watch it with their mind's eye, and write it down." Writers need to learn to trust that it will come. And they need to listen deeply beyond the predictable, the stereotypical, and the easy. They need to trust that there is something beyond a resolution in gunfire, that there is adventure and real life (read: plot) in other places besides Guido's Diner in Far Rockaway, Queens. They need to learn that T females can be heroes, have courage, say meaningful things without the benefit of a wonder bra, mini skirt, and five inch heels, even if the latest Emma Peel from *The Avengers* can collar a criminal wearing crotch tight leather pants and black stiletto boots worthy of a dominatrix. I knew I had to do something because year after year the scripts became more and more predictable: a car crash, a drug deal gone bad, and a Nicholas Cage lookalike, all buff and predatory, running from a fiery explosion, his wild hair flying, his automatic weapon slung on his shoulder like a third appendage. Someone named Lola, fresh from T breast augmentation surgery, waits for him in a smoky dark sublet "somewhere in the bowels of Queens."

And then the media, with Hollywood at the forefront, was forced to take some responsibility for the Columbine massacre and all the high school shoot-outs that preceded it. I felt a very real obligation to my

students to say enough is enough, and force them to create character driven scripts that are about more than bullets, mayhem and corpses.

Martin Scorsese comments in a Premiere (Oct. 1999) interview that "...there is something else going on out there with younger people, and I think it's something at the very core of our materialistic society. The more gadgets you get, the more you get separated from what's really human inside of you" (76-7). In the same interview director Spike Lee argues "I still think that filmmakers have to be responsible. They have to know that a film still has a very powerful impact, and you can't mess with that" (76).

For these very reasons, I worked all summer creating a course that would help them explore their inner selves as writers. It would be difficult, I knew, because this was the generation nurtured on MTV, Sega, sitcoms, and soundbites. We now live in a world of late night Jerry Springer, where unfaithful men sit stage center between two warring women with bad perms who pummel each other with fists and trailer park epithets. The men are usually unappealing, often toothless, and speak in monosyllables punctuated with language that even the Springer producers have to censure in a succession of staccato beeps. This is the same world where male rappers sing about slapping women upside the head, and where aging MTV rockers, pumped up with pheromones and Viagra, incite bikini clad women to spontaneously gyrate like pole dancers at a New Orleans skin club. It's also a world where third graders bring guns to school, where high schoolers can find instructions on how to build a bomb right off the internet, where it's easier to buy an automatic weapon than it is to buy cigarettes. With each impending CNN story, it's no wonder people, and my students in particular, feel disconnected, and are overwhelmed by the weight of all this technology. I began the year with rhythms. I brought drums and tambourines to class and gave them freewriting assignments while I

pranced about the room beating a rhythm. Their only instructions were to write very fast, on hyperspeed, while I accompanied their creative fury with a beat, a rattle, a primordial tap. They resisted at first, not trusting me completely, half thinking, I suppose, that I was a late sixties hippie in mourning for Jerry Garcia, an errant Gypsy run amuck, someone in dire need of a post tenure review. But I persisted, high stepping down the aisles, urging them on. And when they read their works later in class, you could see that for those few moments they had tapped into something, something deeper than a South Park slapstick about flatulence, vomit, or bowel maladies. There was that look of recognition that teachers rarely see, the giant CLICK, the aha. They got to a place that pre-dated technology, automatic weapons, the remote control. The class gave a collective sigh. Later we graduated to Mozart and Beethoven, and like a pregnant mother holding her belly up to the stereo speakers, hoping to improve her future child's mathematical abilities, I doggedly played classical music at the beginning of every hour, having them again write to the rhythms, to go into a trancelike state where automatic writing is the norm. Again, I met some resistance; I could tell they wanted to write to something more contemporary, something where Marilyn Manson sings about pentagrams and suicide, or where someone named Ice or Puffy raps about "bitches" and "ho's" and bad cops. It took 2 weeks for their pencils to glide across the blank paper as if they were channeling from a higher source, forgetting the dark dirges and malaise that inhabited their Walkmans, which they plugged into their ears as soon as class was over.

I knew that journal keeping, a must for any writer, would also meet resistance, guessing my male students might believe journals or diaries were the province of pre-adolescents who secretly wrote mushy verse about Leonardo DiCaprio or The Backstreet Boys. So I passed out three by five cards to each student, and told them to keep them in

their pockets. No matter where they were or what they were doing, I wanted them to write down whatever came to them. An idea. An image. A line of dialogue. The women students handed in notebooks, finding the cards too small for their expansive writing where they often dotted their "i's" with huge circles, reminiscent of giant moons. The male students handed in very little at first, or printed cryptic monosyllabic notes written too small to decipher without my reading glasses. Gradually, the males opened up, got beyond their initial resistance, and began to write. I often read the cards anonymously aloud to the class, like a series of "found poems", and this served expand our experiences even further. "The white dove leaps from the railing, the spirit of my dead grandmother..." I read aloud to the class.

"No Walkmans!" I shouted on our walking "Sensory" tour through the university's Horticultural Gardens. We were there to explore our five senses, savoring the oregano and licorice plants, collecting petals, rocks, and pine cones, watching grackles dive at wild berries. The three-by-five cards emerged; students scribbled furiously as we traipsed through the bougainvillea and the honeysuckle. Of course, I wanted them to hear the hum of the universe, something that may or may not happen on a forced march through nature, led by a drum toting pedagogue hell bent on improving the status of film for the millennium. I could live without the buzz and rattle of a cosmic connection. And they certainly could live without me supplying them with a faux mantra, as I led them on a path of my choosing. But if they could connect, even briefly, to that inner child who at one point in their lives felt everything intensely, reacted to smells, tastes, to touches in ways that we can hardly remember, they may be able to find that original voice they were born with, and like the white dove, leap to a new place. Most important, they worked in groups for the entire class. This is nothing revolutionary in the teaching of writing, of course, but it is essential

for all writers at any stage of their careers. A writing group can be a writer's lifeline---a source of constant evolving inspiration, a place where there is trust. I wish I could say everyone wrote a Citizen Kane or a Schindler's List, but of course, that wasn't the case. I had several heist movies; teenagers who at various stages of stress turned into werewolves, vampires, and vegan Goths. And thanks to HBO's The Sopranos, several scripts featured burly Italians ordering hits on hyperspeed-- like Joe Pesci on amphetamines. Actually the vegan Goth script showed promise and was about an anti-dissection rally staged during a fetal pig lecture in advanced biology at Warren G. Harding High School by three Honors Society girls bound for the Ivy League. It was a workable script with great politics until the girls turned out to be aliens sporting lizard tongues who resolved everything with intergalactic warfare. I frankly was inconsolable when they lost their scholarships to Harvard, Princeton, and Yale respectively. "Can only alien females ever get perfect SAT's?" I argued in a personal writing conference, to no _ avail, still loving the original premise that three females can wage heroic battle against the powers that be, even if they wore all black and pierced their navels and blew up cheerleading practice with laser technology. But I was full of praise for the three female characters who, for awhile, were heroes, spoke meaningful dialogue, and lit up the screen, literally, with an otherworldliness that transcended Mr. Pink and his wiseguy homeboys all suited up and packing heat I somewhere in New Jersey. And that alone made my semester a great success.

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